

MR Review Essays

The New American Militarism

Colonel Kevin C.M. Benson, U.S. Army

As we enter the 21st century, we should study A.J. Bacevich's *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced By War*.¹ Bacevich cites President James Madison who wrote that the most dreaded enemy of public liberty is war: "No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare." I agree with Bacevich's purpose for writing the book—to invite Americans to consider the relevance of Madison's warning to our time and circumstances.

Although I agree with Madison's warning and Bacevich's purpose, I do not agree with his conclusion that our society is seduced by war. I also believe that some of his insights on contemporary history are valid and should inform ongoing debates in the fields of political science, history, and more important, current policymaking. Bacevich provides valid warnings for officers serving the Republic.

Historical Advantage

Historians have the advantage of historical perspective, which allows them to set the stage for policy by showing previously unforeseen second- and third-order effects of past policy decisions. Policymakers must have a sense of history to engage in the continuous analysis and refinement of a policy once a decision is made. Policy is made in the here and now and, most often, in the heat of the moment, because no one wants to make tough and, likely, unpopular decisions when there is no urgency. Here, Bacevich is trying to be a historian and a policy commentator.

Bacevich, a Vietnam veteran and a retired professional soldier, is a latecomer to politics. He has

changed his personal understanding of history by moving away from the theory of Great Men toward seeing history as a force in itself.

Through his observations (especially his appreciation of politics and his experience in seeing the feet of clay of the great men of American politics) he focuses on the premise that U.S. society has been militarized, arguing that the American body politic has grown accustomed to resorting to arms as the final arbiter of policy problems. This tendency is not the result of any one administration but, rather, a trend in U.S. policy since the time of President Woodrow Wilson.

Bacevich opines that Democratic and Republican administrations are neo-Wilsonian in their world view and approach to America's dealings with other nations. Vietnam, as a national experience, was a catalyst for our militarization.

Bacevich also demonstrates how the efforts of four disparate groups—soldiers, intellectuals (both on the right and the left), strategists wrestling with the implications of nuclear weapons, and conservative Christians—conditioned the body politic to use military strength as a measure of greatness and to use force as a first resort in solving policy problems. Bacevich states: "The clamor after Vietnam to rebuild the American arsenal and to restore American confidence, the celebration of soldierly values, the search for ways to make force more usable: all of these came about because groups of Americans thought that they glimpsed in the realm of military affairs the solution to vexing problems."

The book contains many passages

that ostensibly support Bacevich's premise. At times, however, I had difficulty determining which statements were his opinions and which were actual facts.

The best part of the book is Bacevich's exploration of the U.S. soldier's military experience from the Vietnam era to the present. His most powerful statement about the efforts of soldiers in the Vietnam era comes in his opening pages: "Thus, as we shall see, military professionals did regain something approximating the standing that they had enjoyed in American society prior to Vietnam. But their efforts to reassert the autonomy of that profession backfired and left the military in the present century bereft of meaningful influence on basic questions relating to the uses of U.S. military power." I absolutely agree with this statement.

Polls Point to Military as Most Respected

Many people, including soldiers, point to opinion polls that choose the military as one of the most respected professions. While this might be true, it is also ephemeral. What is enduring is the role officers play in the formulation of policy. Bacevich asserts that when General Creighton Abrams linked the regular Army with the Reserve, he attempted to influence policy by limiting the president's power as commander in chief.

Despite his statement that the military has had little influence on the use of military power, Bacevich sees General Colin Powell's influence as the real reason the United States is now at war in Iraq. Bacevich claims Powell prevailed on President George H.W. Bush to

halt Operation Desert Storm before military forces had completely defeated the Iraqi Army, thus removing the possibility of overthrowing Saddam Hussein in 1991.

Bacevich also cites the well-documented argument between Powell and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright over the use of force in the Balkans, and he asserts that it was General Wesley Clark's poor handling of the Kosovo crisis during President Bill Clinton's administration that led President George W. Bush's policymakers to believe senior military officers could not be trusted in executing military operations let alone formulating national policy.

I agree with Bacevich's assertion that in the aftermath of the Vietnam War Army senior leaders focused on tactical and operational matters leaving strategy and policymaking to the civilians. However, resting on that concept and actively pursuing excellence in only the operational and tactical levels of war put the Army on the path of ever-limited influence in developing policy.

I am not advocating that it is the Army's role to develop all security policy; I am advocating that Bacevich's lesson is that officers serving the Republic are obligated to understand how policy is made, where decisions are taken to, and what the implications of these decisions are. To paraphrase former French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, if war is too important to be left to generals, in the 21st century policy is too important for generals and general staff officers to ignore.

Wars are won and the Republic is defended at the strategic and operational levels. If the U.S. Army ignores its duty to help develop policy and strategy, it will squander its tactical success. I am surprised Bacevich did not mention Harry Summers' *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, although in the realm of academe Summers is not well known.² Summers asked those of us in uniform to

remain engaged in the strategic role, and we failed to heed his call.

Bacevich concludes with principles he asserts would cause our society's militaristic tendencies to abate. He calls for a revival of "the moribund concept of the citizen-soldier," saying that the day of the all-volunteer force is over and the Army must ensure it has deep roots among the people. The Army must also be an army of the people and mirror society. He writes that government ought to be "creating mechanisms that will reawaken in privileged America a willingness to serve" I cannot disagree with this.

Bacevich's principles deserve more than debate in the halls of academe or at conferences of political scientists outside of government. Army officers, indeed all officers, have an obligation to engage in internal debates and adopt informed positions. Whether we serve in the Pentagon, on the National Security Council, in the Office of the Legislative Liaison, or in other positions, we must explain the ramifications of our decisions, know the history of past decisions, and explain what the risks are. Officers must understand the when and how of governmental decisionmaking, not to usurp the process, but to be better engaged. The Republic needs to understand just what kind of war we are in and determine what kind of measures are needed to defend the nation.

Do I agree with Bacevich that our society has become militarized and numb to the use of force? No, I do not. Do I agree with Bacevich that there is the appearance of a divorce from the concept of all Americans serving the Nation in uniform as a responsibility of citizenship and that supporting the troops means more than putting a yellow magnetized ribbon on the car? Yes, wholeheartedly.

Professional officers serving in the 21st century must have a grasp of strategy and the development of policy. We must know the origin

of ideas and concepts if we are to serve our soldiers and our Republic. We cannot merely state that the consequence of bad policy is body bags—that is too pat. Before we make decisions, before subordinate staffs must answer the amazing question, We have a brigade on the ground, why can't we go now? we must articulate what security policy and preemption really mean. Courage is a requirement at the tactical level, and it is also an absolute requirement at operational and strategic levels.

I encourage soldiers to read this and other books and enter the debate. We know we are at war. We must participate in articulating the path to victory and the defense of the Republic.

NOTES

1. Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism, How Americans Are Seduced By War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995).

Colonel Kevin C.M. Benson, U.S. Army, is the Director, School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He received a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy; an M.S. from the Catholic University, an M.M.A.S. from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, School of Military Studies, and is a graduate of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has served in various command and staff positions in the continental United States, Germany, and Iraq.

American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador

Lieutenant Manuel A. Orellana, Jr., U.S. Naval Reserve

The United States once again finds itself actively supporting a foreign government in its struggle against a violent insurgent force. For many, the defeat of a capable, determined Iraqi insurgency by coalition forces appears doubtful, and to frustrated U.S. personnel, the lack of an effective counterinsurgency (COIN) policy in Iraq makes the goals and outcome of U.S. policy in Iraq problematic.

Through bouts of criticism and perhaps despair, it is important to point out that the United States has been down this path before. Blueprints on how to better understand and even untangle the problems do exist. Benjamin C. Schwarz's *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador* provides one blueprint.¹ In a RAND-sponsored study, Schwarz assesses the political and social dimensions of U.S. COIN policy in El Salvador circa 1991 and critiques the U.S.'s initial policy goals there.

How can this report about El Salvador's civil war help us understand Iraq? U.S. Government policy in El Salvador, which was designed to "fortify the national armed forces, to wear down the rebels in combat, and bolster democracy [so] as to weaken the rebel's claims," sounds a lot like current policy in Iraq.² El Salvador thus offers a potentially insightful historical parallel to Iraq. A review of Schwarz's book might help identify which of the lessons U.S. personnel learned in El Salvador that we can apply today.

Despite a decade of civil war and committed U.S. involvement, El Salvador was still locked in a struggle against the highly motivated insurgency of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in the early 1990s. Schwarz begins his assessment of U.S. COIN policy

in El Salvador by reviewing U.S. doctrine in Vietnam. He then sets forth explanations as to why U.S. efforts to foster Salvadoran military and civic reform did not produce the desired results. The book concludes with an evaluation of the future efficacy and applicability of then-current doctrine regarding low-intensity conflict (LIC).

Schwarz asserts that by 1991 the United States had failed to reach its goal in El Salvador: a clear-cut victory for the Central American regime. Like a ghost of nationbuilding past, Schwarz points out that in El Salvador "the United States perhaps did not consider sufficiently that human character, history, culture, and social structure are highly resistant to outside influence."³

Schwarz effectively leads the reader through the historical and political background of the conflict, gradually building his argument with facts and logical conclusions. His report was compiled mainly from interviews with numerous press, state department, intelligence, and government officials, in many cases under the condition of anonymity.

America's Future Policies in El Salvador

According to Schwarz, in 1991 LIC doctrine failed for several reasons, foremost of which was the inability to fundamentally alter El Salvador's undemocratic culture. Schwarz states that U.S. strategy to defeat the insurgency required El Salvador's Government to establish a just and equitable society. This demand forced the United States to try to reverse centuries of military and government-sponsored abuse. We failed. It is less important, however, to know that we failed than to know why we failed. According to Schwarz, while the United States

often gave El Salvador the tools to improve its military and civilian institutions, it failed to realize that Salvadoran civil and military society never fully valued or embraced true democratic principles. In his concluding section, Schwarz says: "It is one thing to have the key; it is entirely a different matter to force another to use it to unlock a door through which he does not wish to enter."⁴

Schwarz concludes that U.S. attempts were hampered by ideological blindness. Although the United States vowed that it would not let the insurgents win in El Salvador, it also declared publicly that it would withdraw support from El Salvador's Government if it did not see reform. The result of this perhaps contradictory policy became evident in U.S. advisory efforts.

Attempts to instill the importance of human rights, democratic ideals, and the need for popular support fell flat when presented to Salvadoran officers and politicians who were content within a polarized, authoritarian society. For those leaders, moral rightness did not constitute a particularly compelling reason. In today's equally conflicted world, we need to take off our cultural blinders and understand that our sense of what is right and good cannot—not even when coupled with advanced technology—automatically transform undemocratic societies.

From El Salvador to Iraq and Beyond

Schwarz's predictions about the focus and motivation of U.S. COIN policies are now being tested. The proposals he set forth in 1991 join today's chorus of Americans calling for the creation of a responsive, legitimate government in Iraq, one able and willing to win the people's

voluntary support. Schwarz's recommendations on how to undercut the legitimacy of an insurgency, and his warnings against a COIN policy that ties U.S. interests to foreign nationbuilding efforts, seem validated as the United States once again tries to eliminate an insurgency movement in a foreign land.

In his analysis and assessments, Schwarz claims it is still vital that those living in threatened societies

willingly accept U.S. assistance and conform to democratic criteria. In Vietnam and El Salvador, the United States mistakenly tied U.S. interests in the region to the actions of fledgling, uncooperative governments. Fourteen years after the publication of Schwarz's report, we must heed his assessment and review current COIN policy to ensure we have learned from our mistakes.

NOTES

1. Benjamin C. Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991).
2. *Ibid.*, v.
3. *Ibid.*, 71.
4. *Ibid.*, 77.

Lieutenant Antonio Orellana, Jr., U.S. Navy Reserve, received a B.S. from the University of Maryland and an M.S. from the Naval Postgraduate School. He has served in various strategic, operational, and tactical assignments.



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